

9-1-1929

The Estes House Hospital

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Frederic C. "The Estes House Hospital." *The Palimpsest* 10 (1929), 341-350.
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol10/iss9/4>

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The Estes House Hospital

Keokuk rode the high tide of a municipal boom in 1856. Town lots were sold profitably, new business enterprises were started, and companies were organized — mostly in terms of paper money. In the spring of 1857, Rufus Wilsey and a few others who had faith in the future of Keokuk invested all the money they could borrow in a quarter of a block on Main Street and there began to erect a magnificent hotel. Equities in real estate were traded for lumber, brick, and labor. Construction proceeded rapidly. On June 29th the cornerstone was laid with appropriate ceremony by J. C. Estes, a prominent citizen of Keokuk. Within two months came the financial panic of 1857, resources dwindled, and the building had to be sold at auction before the upper floors were finished.

Designed for a hotel, the Estes House was transformed into a hospital early in the dark days of 1862, the largest of the five buildings utilized for that purpose in Keokuk. Situated in the very heart of the business district, it sheltered hundreds of wounded men, brought by steamboat from the southern battle fields. From its doors wound a daily procession to the burial plot just west of the city, which became Iowa's only National Cemetery.

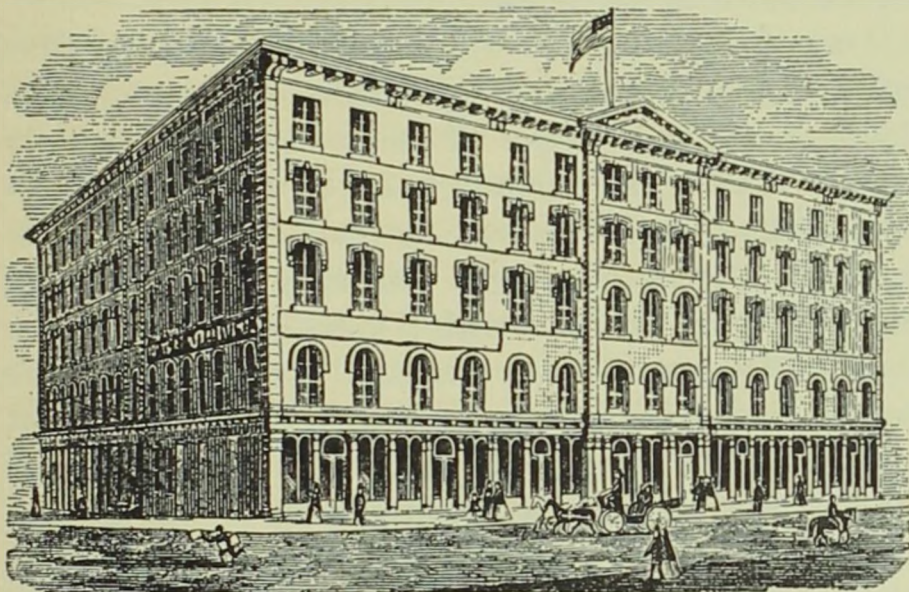
On April 17, 1861, the citizens of Keokuk assem-

bled in Verandah Hall and, "casting aside all party differences", pledged themselves with all the means in their power "to support the government and flag of the United States, henceforth and until the present conflict is ended," recognizing in the "present crisis but two parties, patriots and traitors". Two days later it was announced that Keokuk would be the rendezvous for the first Iowa regiments. Immediately the city prepared to welcome the troops and to coöperate wholeheartedly with the Federal authorities. Before the end of the summer, sick and wounded soldiers were being sent north to improvised hospitals. Keokuk, conveniently located in Iowa on the Mississippi River, was naturally selected as a rehabilitation base.

When the news of the bloody battle of Shiloh reached Keokuk, preparations were made at once to provide additional hospital facilities. On April 17, 1862, under orders from headquarters of the Department of the Mississippi to receive three hundred wounded soldiers, Lieutenant J. C. Ball and Mayor Robert P. Creel took possession of the Estes House. Men and women volunteered to clean up the rooms, some of which had not been used since they were plastered. The government spent over a thousand dollars in repairs on the building. Innumerable difficulties were encountered in converting the five-story hotel into a hospital, and some things had to be neglected. But by the time the patients arrived most of the two hundred rooms were in readiness

and efficient organization gradually dissipated the preliminary noise and confusion.

At first the government bargained to pay \$160 a month rent for the Estes House but this was later increased to \$200. Still J. Edgar Thompson, President of the Pennsylvania Railroad, who held mortgages on the property, was dissatisfied and de-



THE OLD ESTES HOUSE

manded \$8000 a year. Much correspondence ensued. Finally, on January 30, 1864, the sum of \$300 a month from the date of occupancy was agreed upon. During the last four months the building was used as a hospital, however, the rent was reduced to \$166.66.

Two weeks after the hotel was converted into a hospital, records showed 293 patients in the Estes

House. Thirty-seven deaths had occurred. By July of 1862 there were 1500 patients in all of the hospitals of Keokuk, attended by two hundred doctors, nurses, and guards. By the end of the following year, 7396 patients had been admitted, of which number 617 had died. By far the largest number of patients were in the Estes House Hospital which contained over 650 beds.

One of the volunteer watchers at the hospital soon after it was established was unfavorably impressed by the noise and bustle. It seemed to him that "any man of half sense" should know that "perfect quiet and rest are as necessary as proper medical treatment." People who "can not walk without raking their heels on the floor with a noise akin to that of a saw mill" ought to be required "to lay off their boots and use slippers." One hospital attendant particularly "went rushing through the halls as if he had just received a dispatch announcing the end of the world, and was desirous of communicating it to the whole house in the shortest possible time." The squeak of his "blatant boots" was like "a cross between a John Chinaman's gong and the bleat of a distressed calf".

It had never been the fortune of the editor of the *Keokuk Gate City* to see "so many emaciated forms, fevered and pain racked bodies," as filled the Estes House. Yet by the middle of June most of the two hundred and eighty patients seemed on the way to recovery. The building, he thought, was "admirably

adapted to hospital uses" on account of its spacious and airy rooms, and the patients had cause to be thankful for the "unexceptionable accommodations".

The citizens of Keokuk were called upon to furnish supplies and bedding. Sheets, pillows, comforts, quilts, blankets, bandages, dressing gowns, towels, handkerchiefs, shirts, and drawers were contributed by the women of the city. Provisions for the commissary were also collected. A newspaper of that time tells of the replenishing of the hospital kitchens with crackers, eggs, butter, dried fruits, jellies, cordials, sugar, dried beef, green tea, mustard, tapioca, nutmegs, sage, corn starch, farina, and solidified milk. Farmers living near Keokuk donated hundreds of wagon loads of stove wood. During one cold winter the Estes House Hospital consumed five hundred cords.

By way of making the hospitals more homelike and cheerful, the chief surgeon and chaplains solicited contributions of flowering plants, "native and exotic, potted or boxed," from the patriotic ladies of Keokuk and vicinity. Conservatories were to be established in all of the well-lighted halls and large rooms.

In this connection the work of the Soldiers' Aid Societies of Iowa Ladies was particularly important. After the battle of Shiloh, Mrs. Ann E. Harlan procured a pass from the Secretary of War to visit the battle field and minister to the wounded.

It was she who induced the authorities to send a steamer load of the more seriously injured soldiers to Keokuk. Later she was prominent in effecting a State organization of local aid societies. Mrs. I. K. Fuller, wife of the chaplain of an Iowa regiment, accompanied her husband in the field and became the first army nurse appointed from Iowa. Probably the most popular army nurse was "Aunt Becky" Young. First to visit the army hospitals and minister to the sick was Mrs. J. T. Fales, while to Mrs. Annie Wittenmyer of Keokuk belongs the credit for correcting the diet of the soldiers in the hospitals. Appointed State Sanitary Agent by Governor Kirkwood, she became one of the most efficient and energetic leaders in the cause of alleviating the suffering and satisfying the wants of the soldiers in camps and hospitals.

Keokuk, situated on the border between Iowa and Missouri where northern and southern sympathies clashed, was the scene of one of the most dramatic incidents of hospital life early in 1863. Convalescent soldiers, incensed at what they deemed a disloyal thrust at their country, staged a violent attack on the Keokuk *Constitution*, took possession of the office, "broke up the presses and threw them, together with cases of type and all other contents of the building into the street." Two drays were pressed into service to haul the type and presses to the river where they were dumped into the water. The riot "took everybody by surprise, but the num-

bers were so formidable that no opposition was made until the contents of the office were in ruins. Lieutenant C. J. Ball, commandant of the post, finally marshaled the provost guard and sufficient reinforcements to quell the disorder.

Several days before the raid, a hundred and fifty convalescent soldiers signed a statement in justification of their contemplated action.

We, the undersigned soldiers of the U. S. army, being fully convinced that the influence of a paper published in this city called "The Constitution," edited by Thos. Clagett, has exerted and is exerting a treasonable influence, (inexcusable by us as soldiers) against the Government for which we have staked our all, in the present crisis. We, therefore, consider it a duty we owe to ourselves, our brethren in the field, our families at home, our Government and our God, to demolish and cast into the Mississippi river, the press and machinery used for the publication of the aforesaid paper, and any person or persons that interfere, so HELP US GOD.

The affair caused a military inquiry. At the close of the investigation in July the court martial reported that Lieutenant Ball had been acquitted of "any wrong in connection with the destruction of the Constitution newspaper plant". On July 21st, at the Deming House, a banquet was served in his honor at which he was presented with a sword and a brace of pistols. In justice to Editor Clagett it should be stated that saner times and more mature judgment absolved him from the charge of disloy-

alty. The *Constitution* resumed publication on September 1st, after a suspension of nearly six months "through the force of circumstances and other forces".

Some of the soldiers became much attached to their temporary home and a spirit of mild rivalry developed between the inmates of the different hospitals. In August, 1863, the patients of the Estes House Hospital unfurled a five foot flag over the building. An artist in one of the consignments of wounded men, E. C. Cobb, Company I, Twelfth Iowa Infantry, made some sketches of the old hospital which, declared a writer in the *Gate City*, presented "a fair appearance" and would "render our hospital more noted at Washington, and serve to secure to it a full supply of patients, during the continuation of the war, and all needed advantages for conducting it."

At the time of the national election in 1864, soldiers in the Estes House voted strongly for President Lincoln, expressing splendid faith in their Commander-in-Chief. Lincoln received five hundred and thirty votes, while McClellan polled only thirteen.

The task of evacuating the hospitals began early in the summer of 1865. On August 16th, the Surgeon-General directed that all of the hospitals in Keokuk be closed and the patients transferred to Davenport. And so, on October 1st, the Estes House resumed its peace-time function of hotel and office

building. But from the day that the last invalid was discharged, some of the rooms on the fifth floor of the old building stood undisturbed, just as they were left after serving three years as hospital wards.

For years after the war the Estes House served the community as a hotel. The United States court with its attendant officers was also housed there. In later years it fell into disrepair and, except for the first floor and a few rooms on the second floor, it was vacant. High wire walkers who performed at old-fashioned street fairs used the upper floors of the building for dressing rooms whence they stepped out upon the narrow strand of wire and walked across the chasm of the street to thrill the crowd below.

The G. A. R. posts occupied the hall on the second floor, where veterans were wont to assemble within the walls of the old hospital and fight over the stirring days of the rebellion. When the fifty-second encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic met in Keokuk in 1926, the veterans were keenly interested in the old structure. As they marched by in their parade they saluted it with old-time fervor.

But now the Estes House is gone. For years it survived the attacks of time, of fire and the elements; it weathered periodic storms of aldermanic reform, while public safety demanded that the structure be condemned. But at last it succumbed to the march of progress and was razed to make room for

a modern business structure. All that is left of the building, save its many memories, is the old cornerstone, which has been preserved. On October 1, 1929, it will be placed in its final resting place in the National Cemetery. At the same time a permanent bronze marker will be attached to the new building to tell the story of the old. Upon the glass-encased cornerstone in Iowa's little Arlington a bronze tablet will bear this inscription approved by the Quartermaster General:

Cornerstone of the old Estes House, Fifth and Main, Keokuk, Iowa. Site of Army Hospital, April, 1862 — October 1, 1865. Erected to the memory of the soldiers who died in the old General Hospital at Keokuk and are buried in the National Cemetery.

And thus the memory of those brave days will be perpetuated in the preservation of this relic among the graves of the men to whom the old hospital was a haven of mercy and relief from the pain of the battle field.

FREDERIC C. SMITH